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## TEACHING THE BIBLE IN THE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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A revival in the teaching of Bible stories in the public schools seems to be at hand. And since the Bible is the essential background of very much of our literature as well as of our culture, the endeavor to present it to pupils comes naturally through the machinery of school English. How the Bible has suffered in recent years! The woeful inadequacy of the Sunday school has robbed it of vitality and associated it in youngsters' minds with undesirable emotionalism and mawkish sentimentality. The strides of modern invention and achievement have made it seem dull and lifeless. The passing away of the old-fashioned family circle has contributed greatly also to crowding this Book of Books out from the consciousness of the ordinary boy and girl of today. Yet the Bible is not only the most important book of all literature, but probably also the most fascinating. Its grip on young people is very strong. In the hands of a skilful teacher it can be made an exceedingly effective means for developing in pupils initiative, self-activity, insight into character, and many of the other personal qualities at which modern education distinctly aims. And its content of course is indispensable to anyone who would hold up his head in cultured society.

But, if the Bible is to be taught at all, it must be handled by a teacher who understands thoroughly the modern ideals of the school-room. He will lead pupils, not drive them. He will have them go forward freely as individuals, not as a group doing identical, absolutely prescribed, and limited work. He will heed always their personal and family predilections; Bible-study is a field hedged with prejudice. He will grant very freely excuses from this or that particular task; he will be content to yield the little things in order to accomplish the large. In general, this master-teacher of the

Bible will be more flexible, more considerate, more suggestive, more companionable, and more firm in grip, though less didactic, than he who directs any other kind of classroom work.

The following pages present an actual, practical procedure in teaching the Bible, a procedure which during the last three years has been developed in the Wisconsin High School of the University of Wisconsin. It is there so effective that it will probably be valuable as a suggestion to other schools.

The first stage of this new way of presenting the Bible as a vital portion of the work of the English class is a conversation between the teacher and his pupils on two large matters. Standing in front of the class with the blackboard at hand, on which he can easily place names, diagrams, and other aids to comprehension, the teacher talks, with constant informal questions to the class and consideration of many volunteered suggestions, about the Bible story as a whole, from Genesis to Revelation and beyond. The topic might be, *What the Bible Is About*. The teacher enables every child to see that it is an account of how God created a world free from sin, how sin came into this world, and how ever since then God has tried to free the world from evil and accomplish his original intention. Four attempts stand out clearly; he indicates them in diagrammatic form: the ideal world of Eden, which was corrupted by the disobedience of Adam and Eve and ended pitifully in the great flood; the world of Noah and his descendants, which terminated in the fiasco of the Tower of Babel; the attempt through Abraham; and the attempt through Christ when the Jews after a two-thousand-year trial had failed. It is quite fitting also that the teacher should ask frankly in this time of international cataclysm whether Christianity in its own two thousand years of opportunity has yet succeeded in accomplishing God's plan. Perhaps he might even, reverently but clearly, indicate the possibility that it too may ultimately fail. So large a view as this necessarily interests young people and stretches their imaginations. The details of the Bible now have a general outline in which to fit as one by one they are acquired. Perhaps the greatest curse of the Sunday-school method of teaching the Scriptures has been its piecemeal character.

Yet a second point the teacher brings out in this preliminary discussion on the first day. He makes a very clear-cut exposition of three terms which must be understood and differentiated before it is desirable or even safe to undertake the study of the Bible in a public-school class. Clearly and carefully he explains the meaning of the terms Religion, Theology, and Bible Stories. Religion is worship of a deity, any deity outside a man's own self and any form of worship. Everybody in the world is religious, even the most ignorant savage, except, as perhaps the teacher incidentally remarks, possibly a few ultra-modern products of our civilization who think it clever and startling not to be. Theology is man's thought about religion, his conceptions about gods and Jehovah, the methods which he has devised throughout the ages for worshipping and for molding his conduct according to his conceptions of a deity. Bible stories are in themselves neither religion nor theology. They are interesting stories about people and adventures. All the world knows them, nearly all literature refers to them, and no one who assumes to have culture may be ignorant of them. The work of the class will be then merely an undertaking to become intimately acquainted with interesting stories which the Bible tells. It will not attempt to make people religious who are not religious; certainly it will in no way attempt to change anyone's theological ideas. The teacher explains clearly that if any pupil is a Baptist, there will be no attempt to make him a Presbyterian; if he is a Catholic, there will be no attempt to make him a Protestant; and if he is a Jew, a Mohammedan, or a Hindu, he will in no wise be invited to change his beliefs. Bible stories are a background for all culture and study of literature regardless of one's own religion and theology.

Throughout the days which follow the teacher is constantly alert to maintain the spirit of this introductory talk. Many a time he stops in their inception questions or comments which are fraught with danger. He permits no discussions whatever of the probable truth of a story. He accepts no questioning of the miraculous as bearing on the points in which the class is interested. He makes so little insistence on rigid requirements of accomplishment that the wishes of the homes, as the pupils express them, are

respectfully received and in general agreed to. The long way around is the short way home. He is indeed so careful to avoid every appearance of proselyting that he often from time to time takes deliberate pains to keep at their ease children who belong to the unusual minority sects. Even if a suspicious and rather angry parent or pastor calls at the schoolroom door, the teacher receives him so cordially and frankly, is apparently so ready to yield, is so interested and respectful to the other's point of view, and is so willing to shift the burden squarely upon the home or the pastor, if they will undertake to have this particular child master in their own way the Bible stories, that even such critics as these, who come fully determined to make trouble, are sent away as friends. No matter how much is thus yielded, by the way, practically every child from sheer proximity and curiosity really learns all the stories. This preliminary work in clearing the ground for the Bible itself is very essential. The skilful teacher does not neglect it. By mild, patient, tactful exposition of the aims of the work he insures co-operation, speed, and ultimate success.

On the next day, when the child comes to class, he finds the walls of the room literally covered with interesting Bible pictures, most of them, if not all, in colors. If necessary, the usual bulletin boards have been supplemented by large, improvised boards of one sort or another.

A number of delightful sets of Bible pictures are available for school use at very small cost. The school or, better yet, the teacher should own a full equipment. Of them all, the Tissot pictures are probably the best, for not only are they full of remarkable oriental detail, but they are printed in colors and consequently are much more vital to a child than a mere black and white drawing. About two hundred and eighty pictures, at a cent each, are in the series. A great many splendid Bible pictures in colors are printed, however, also by the illustrated magazines. An alert teacher will have no difficulty in collecting very cheaply a considerable number of these. Watchfulness and pains, not money, is the price to be paid.

Each picture on the schoolroom walls bears a serial number and a Bible reference. By a few words of explanation the teacher initiates the procedure of the class. Each pupil, he explains, is to

take in hand a sheet of paper and a small book for a backing on which he can write. He is then to spend the hour looking at pictures. Whenever he comes to a picture concerning which he cannot tell the Bible story, he is to write on his sheet of paper the number and then pass on to another picture. When he does know the story connected with a picture, he is merely to rehearse it quietly to himself and then pass on without making any note on his paper. The class then goes eagerly to work. Of course, there is activity. Of course, there is a slight hum of conversation. Of course, there is a certain amount both of co-operation and of individual interference. But the teacher is not disturbed by these things. Active, interested children cannot be expected to work like silent automations. Each pupil proceeds absolutely as an individual. He goes forward at his own best speed, not in lockstep with the class. If he stops momentarily to help a friend or to borrow a hint from someone who knows more than he, it is a legitimate matter so long as he does not disturb his fellow-students. The teacher goes quietly about the room, consulting with this pupil and that, answering questions, making suggestions, and unobtrusively maintaining order. He is the captain, the leader of the group, not a lecturer. Being a skilful teacher, he invariably stops disorder quite before it occurs. The entire class hour is spent in this animated work. All the pupils are interested and active and are going forward as individuals, but are at every instant guided and controlled by the grip of the teacher on the group.

This preliminary work of looking at pictures may last two days. The assignment thereafter is for each pupil to bring from home his own Bible, the request being tactfully emphasized by a statement that anyone who forgets will find himself left out of the most interesting part of the next day's work, or else will make himself a nuisance to his friends by trying to borrow their Bibles. Somewhere in the room a shelf is cleared for the storage of these Bibles from day to day so that no pupil will be required to carry back and forth daily this extra book. Each youngster is now set to work to look up in his Bible the stories of all the pictures which are listed on his paper as unknown. He and all his fellows spend the hour in an eager and busy alternation of looking at a posted picture and

reading in the Bible the story pertaining to it. At will he is at the boards or in his seat. He may go as fast as he can go; he may ask questions and co-operate with other pupils, so long as he does not make of himself a nuisance to the class. There are in the school-room, no doubt, all kinds of Bibles and substitutes for Bibles. The teacher is cordial to all alike, merely remarking from time to time that a particular youngster who consults with him will have to ask some other pupil for a story not in his own book. The teacher is both a consulting expert and a responsible executive. He passes judgment on different matters in the research; he insures rapid, quiet, accurate work by each individual. He aids and stimulates all pupils who are in difficulties. Sometimes, when an under-developed youth is quite at a loss to know what to do, the teacher sends a really excellent pupil to work with him awhile and tactfully teach him how to help himself. In a certain recent group in the Wisconsin High School a small boy came quietly to the instructor saying, "James hasn't started yet. He doesn't know what to do." The lad was sent unobtrusively, without James's suspecting the assignment, to lend his own tactful help toward starting the backward one on his way. Ten minutes later, as he happened to pass the teacher, he reported smilingly, in a low tone, "James is all right now. He's getting on."

This kind of work occupies perhaps three days or thereabouts. At the end of the first class hour the teacher tactfully introduces the one-volume edition of the *Modern Reader's Bible* as an excellent and easily read form of the Scriptures. Thereafter several copies of this invaluable book are kept on his desk and lent each day in school and for home-reading. In the Wisconsin High School it has actually happened that a pupil, under the inspiration of Professor Moulton's book, has delightedly read the Bible quite through because he found it interesting and had by himself come to the realization that he knew too little about it.

The next step is a test on the pictures. This test, I need hardly say, is not given primarily to secure a grade for record, a procedure which smacks mainly of the routine, lifeless ways of old-time teaching. It is principally a device for bringing up the laggards and encouraging the excellent pupils who have done their work notably

well. It is mainly an agency for unifying somewhat the class effort and accomplishment. The procedure of the test is simple. The pupil group is divided into several sections. On the blackboard lists of numbers referring to pictures are written for each section. Each pupil spends the hour alternating between bulletin board and desk; he looks at the pictures one by one and then writes out on his test paper the story of each. There is, of course, now no conversation and no co-operation between pupils. For the nonce each one is strictly on his own resources. Not all the pupils finish or are expected to finish the test, although this point is perhaps not stated to the class. The teacher afterward grades the papers rather roughly, endeavoring, in fact, merely to pick out the excellent pupils for praise and the very slow ones for more stimulus, encouragement, and direction. There is opportunity later for them to make up their deficiencies.

The class has now arrived at the stage of telling Bible stories. Although this can be done from the pictures, it can be better done from a mimeographed sheet listing the principal interesting stories in the Bible with references to each, in terms both of book, chapter, and verse and of pages and titles in the *Modern Reader's Bible*. Occupying as many days as are necessary for this work, or rather as many as are interesting and productive to the class, there is now oral story-telling. A pupil-chairman presides, selected by vote at the beginning of each hour distinctly as a reward for previous excellence. Proud of his responsibility, he directs the class with dignity. As he wills, he calls on pupils for the stories in order, and after each story invites and closes the resulting discussion. He summarizes, if necessary, what the class has said about a particular pupil's strong points and weaknesses in giving his contribution. Excellent pupil-chairmen learn early and very accurately not to call on members of the class at random, but to do as every excellent teacher does, usually give the timid and backward pupils the first chance and hold the dependable, thorough ones in reserve to close the discussion. Each pupil, when he is called on for a story, goes to the front of the room to talk. The members of the class who have comments afterward hold up their hands to indicate the fact and, when recognized by the chairman, stand up at their seats to give



their criticisms. The teacher sits somewhere in the room or perhaps walks about occasionally from one place to another. He is silent while things are going well and the pupils are making satisfactory progress. From time to time he gives his own comments practically as the pupils give theirs. Invariably he offers his criticisms last, after every other member of the group has had a chance to state his points. He has a quiet, unobtrusive grip on the whole procedure. Sometimes he moves silently around the room to a point where disorder impends. Perhaps he says a few quiet words conversationally to one or two individuals during the hour about the maintenance of decorum. When it is necessary, he speaks up quickly to hold the class to essential points or to assist the chairman. If the chairman makes notable strategic blunders, doing such things as a good leader ought not to do, the teacher instantly invites constructive comment on him. Every chairman must realize fully that he is an executive responsible for keeping the other people going; he must not talk much himself. The class learns this point very quickly indeed. With great glee it will comment on a chairman, "The teacher talks too much!" The socialized procedure in such a class as this is always more apparent than fundamental. It is a device for interesting, developing, and rewarding pupils. Fundamentally, the teacher, though inconspicuous and in the background, always sets the general task upon which pupils busy themselves and controls the achievement and spirit of the class. A "socialized recitation" which is not at every stage within the immediate grip of the teacher is an educational tragedy.

Several days are necessarily spent in this story-telling. No specific assignments are set. For the excellent pupils there is leisure to read, perfect, and assimilate; for the laggards there is time to catch up with the rest of the group.

At the end of the routine work of telling orally the listed narratives the teacher announces one or two days of story-telling in competition. Each youngster may select his own narrative and give it in his own way. The class takes notes on his performance but does not comment. At the end of the competition, however, it votes by ballot to name the pupils who have most distinguished themselves.

The next step in the study of the Bible is the finding and recognizing of Bible references in literature. The game is initiated in this manner. As the outside work during the two days of competition each pupil finds somewhere in literature at least four clear references to Bible stories and brings these written out to class. If he falls into difficulties, he may consult with the teacher for hints. In a recent ninth-year class the range was from Milton and Cowper to the *Good Housekeeping* magazine. Longfellow and Whittier were, of course, very commonly quoted, and both the newspapers and the current periodicals were used more than one would expect. Cowper was, in fact, a find for one boy, who presented, not four, but perhaps a dozen fine Bible references from his poems.

The story-telling in competition being now finished, the procedure in identifying Bible references in literature goes forward as follows. In front of the class stands the teacher with a handful of the slips which have been handed in. He reads one Bible reference and invites an upraised hand from each pupil who can state the underlying Bible story. The youngsters are then called on judiciously and quickly, often beginning with the poorer ones. On the easier stories they are cut short as soon as their grasp is clearly apparent. Speed, rather than thoroughness, is the teacher's aim. Pupils who do not usually volunteer freely always receive the first chance. The teacher praises anyone who is right. There is, however, no blame for him who is wrong, no scolding, and, of course, as one ought not to need to say, there is never any sarcasm; a really good teacher never uses sarcasm. It is truly amazing what readiness and accuracy in identifying even obscure references can be obtained in a class that has been working only about two weeks on the Bible. For any common reference a score of hands will be instantly waving a response.

A further step, on which one day may very profitably be spent, is the giving of quotations from the Bible. A day or two of warning is necessary to insure the best results. Each pupil may select his own quotations and may give as many as he knows. If time permits, after each quotation the class holds up hands to indicate ability to state the context and the place in the Bible from which the passage comes.

The next bit of procedure is exceedingly interesting. From a study of the actual Bible stories the class proceeds to the invention of fiction based on the Bible narrative. Yet the spirit of the work is entirely different from that of the old-time, stilted "literary composition." Every youngster has had his imagination quickened. Now he makes up his own "Bible" stories. He reads them to the class; he may write as many as he can; there is no limit to his opportunities.

Of course, it is clearly understood by everyone that the work now is fiction, stories which are known to be not true but inventions. There is really no difficulty involved, though some may seem inevitable to an outsider. It is easy to separate fiction based on the Bible from what the Bible actually says, and the imagining of such fiction is certainly neither irreligious nor disrespectful. The point must, however, be very carefully established. The teacher not only states it but, to accomplish the purpose, even breaks the excellent fundamental rule of modern composition teaching, that a literary model must not be given before the pupil has created his own writing. In a conversation with the class which drifts more or less into interesting story-telling on his own part, the teacher summarizes two or three of the notable writings of English literature which have a Biblical background. *Ben Hur*, *The Other Wise Man*, and *Paradise Lost* are conspicuous works of this kind. By citing such splendid literary authority he is now forearmed against the parent or the pastor who sends word by the pupil that fiction concerning the Bible is not nice.

On the first day of this new endeavor the teacher also suggests some possible subjects. These are not, however, to be written about, but are merely to define the general undertaking, to indicate the kind of thing which each pupil is to invent for himself. A Philistine boy, for instance, who serves in the army with the giant champion, Goliath, gives his personal account of the great combat. A slave girl of the train of the Queen of Sheba tells of the visit to Solomon's court. A maiden in the royal household of King Ahasuerus tells how her rival, Esther, became the queen. Such suggestions as these are enough to start eager writing.

On the next day and for several days following the class hour is given up to listening to stories which are read by their writers

to the group. As many stories as possible are heard in each hour, but following every one there is an opportunity for comment and discussion. After they are read, the writings are handed in to be criticized as manuscript by the teacher. There is no limit to the number of stories which any pupil may write. As soon as he has finished one tale, he may begin another, and no pupil is required to have a story ready on the first day or on any particular day. Excuses from day to day are freely given, although, of course, every person is expected to have, sooner or later, a certain stated minimum of stories. A check list is posted in a convenient public place; on it each pupil's accomplishment is plainly indicated. Publicity is an excellent spur to effort.

The narratives which are presented rival in daring imagination Wallace, van Dyke, and Milton. They are juvenile, to be sure, but they are not incomparable to real literature. There is the autobiography of a ram, a member, as he tells us, of an unlucky family; his brother has just been driven out into the desert as a scapegoat, and one of his ancestors was sacrificed by Abraham in place of Isaac. We have an account at first hand by a Philistine of Samson's destruction of the temple, and Ruth tells her own story. There is certainly no lack of interest; the very excellent pupils write in three or four days hardly less than a half-dozen stories. On each day, as perhaps one need now hardly remark, a pupil-chairman, selected for merit, presides, and the teacher sits in the back of the room and speaks only rarely.

The next step is dramatization; the teacher does not wait for the story-telling to cease to be interesting. It would be very poor pedagogy indeed to let so exciting a thing become trite. After three or four days he ushers in a complete change which brings even more vividness. The new activity is definitely limited in advance to two class hours. It is not to drag on. The young people are invited to group themselves informally by two's, three's, or four's to present Bible stories, either exactly as they are or with modifications. This work in dramatization cannot be well done unless it implies freedom to extemporize; the Bible narrative often needs to be expanded by the addition of imaginary situations, dialogue accompanying action, or even supplementary characters. Having developed their imaginations through writing their own fiction, the

pupils are now well prepared to act out spontaneously and vigorously interesting, inventive little plays.

On the first day of this work there is evident informality. Many presentations are given, most of them sketchy and short; hardly any are really excellent. The class is evidently feeling its way. But one group, which has secretly prepared costumes, presents its play and incidentally lifts its audience to higher achievements. On the second day practically everything is acted in costume. There have been eager rehearsals both at school and in the homes, and there is much half-suppressed excitement. On this second day there are visitors—an enthusiastic crowd, perhaps including a few parents. The plays, as on the first day, are of all kinds. Many are in dumb show; a few have elaborate dialogue. On the first day there was after each presentation an opportunity for brief comments and suggestions, but on the second day there is not. The time is needed to care for the number of offerings which are now ready. There is no chairman or other presiding officer; none is necessary. At the beginning of the hour the teacher writes on the board in the order in which the several groups have volunteered to appear a list of the leaders responsible for putting on the various plays. Throughout the hour, then, the presentation is automatic. The teacher remains in the background among the visitors, save that now and then when a rather unusual story is acted, he invites raised hands from all who can identify it accurately, and who know where to find it in the Bible. Two or three times he puts detailed identification questions to persons whose manner of affirming seems possibly to indicate uncertainty. The range of the stories presented in this kind of performance is remarkable, and some are surprisingly elaborate. The Hagar and Ishmael drama, for instance, was, in the Wisconsin High School, acted from beginning to end with very elaborate invention. Sarah was jealous and angry; in an eloquent soliloquy she told her troubles; then she insisted vigorously to the disturbed Abraham that the interloper be banished. Soon Hagar, supporting the fainting Ishmael, plodded bravely through the desert. Presently a white-clad angel with wings came to comfort her and to point out a spring of reviving water. And at the end Hagar and Ishmael were at home again,

old Abraham was happy, and Sarah forgiving and mild. The spirit of the primitive Miracle Plays is with us always in the imaginations of children. In these bits of drama, God, the angels, and the devil all appear in person and speak as directly as do mundane characters. Another delightful story recently acted by such a group of junior high school pupils was the little night-time drama of Eli and the child Samuel. In it, by the way, God spoke through a crack in the slightly opened schoolroom door! And in another playlet Jacob dreamed his dream, and real angels waving gauzy wings ascended and descended a stepladder just outside the door. David slew Goliath with much gusto, and the giant fell with an appropriate crash. The drama of the good Samaritan was acted without costume, but with remarkable pantomime and not a little humor. Esther became the queen, and Peter thrice denied his Lord. In the latter play a small boy crowed lustily, thus using to the full perhaps his one and only conspicuous dramatic talent. This kind of work also must, of course, be stopped while the interest is yet keen. It must not tire out its audience; it must leave an appetite for more.

There is now for several days a return to the story-telling. The new writings are more vivid and dramatic and more conversational than the former.

The study of the Bible is now at an end, although it is still interesting. It has occupied, in all, about four weeks' time. Like every other similar unit of the year's work, it has not seldom amazed the instructor by revealing in various pupils latent, unsuspected possibilities which he could hardly otherwise have found. A few who have hitherto seemed poorest are now developing conspicuously. From the Bible the class (in the Wisconsin High School) passes quite naturally to a general study of the technique of writing dialogue. Through a conversational kind of lecturing, accompanied by many questions and much diagramming on the blackboard, the teacher presents the essential things about paragraphing, punctuating, and securing variety. Then the pupils begin a season of writing dialogues. At first Biblical material naturally is very common; it is quite permissible; but soon the class passes on to conversations quite removed from Biblical sources.

In conclusion, we must consider the one most critical general factor involved in this work of teaching Bible stories in a secular schoolroom. Biblical literature is indispensable for the background of a truly cultured and well-read youth, and it is educationally productive and intensely interesting, but it is nevertheless the most difficult and dangerous thing which a teacher of English can possibly undertake to present. Tenure of office might quickly terminate after a single slip in the delicate procedure. The teacher is always on dangerous ground. Theological factions are both suspicious and bitter. In some localities, indeed, their acrimony probably will quite prohibit Bible-study, even though, as is likely, this prohibition will mean for most of the children approximately complete ignorance of the Bible. And even under the most favorable circumstances the Bible can safely be taught in the public schools only to youngsters who have not yet grown into the stage of analysis, question, and challenge; probably the ninth school year, the upper junior high school grade, is exactly right. Older pupils are almost certain to insist on delving into theology, and theology brings trouble. The teacher who directs work in the Bible in a public-school class must be big and broad. He must rise above denominationalism. If he really expects some day to find heaven peopled only by beings who have come through his own sect, he must indeed let the Bible alone, for he is inadequate to the task of teaching it. Good intentions and moral intensity are no substitute for breadth. The teacher must be able to conciliate everyone, to yield every point gracefully, to disarm the angry critic, and yet to accomplish the result which he sets out to gain. He must even, in some schools, when he teaches the Bible, actually violate the law of the commonwealth. Laws against the Bible in the public schools are on many statute books and are no doubt necessarily there to prevent proselyting and sectarianism. But on our statute books are many laws which are not meant to be strictly enforced every day. Ought one not to class the legislation against the Bible with the eight-mile-an-hour automobile law, an enactment invaluable for occasional police purposes, but not to be a barrier to the clear-sighted, the careful, the public-spirited?